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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 001101

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [KWMN](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#) [SOCI](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI VOICES OF FEMINISM: RUNNING THE GAMUT FROM DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS ADVOCACY TO PATRIARCHAL CONTROL

REF: A. 08 RIYADH 233
[B.](#) 08 RIYADH 625
[C.](#) RIYADH 875
[D.](#) RIYADH 1012
[E.](#) RIYADH 1026

RIYADH 00001101 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Political Counselor Lisa M. Carle reason 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY:

[11.](#) (C) The Saudi male guardianship system is the major impediment to advancing the status of women in Saudi Arabia. Although various women's groups have challenged the system, it has deep roots in Saudi culture and tradition, but very little basis in law, as opposed to regulations or policies. Limited aspects of the system have been codified into laws, such as the Law on Passports, which requires Saudi women to obtain the Guardian's consent to travel. Efforts to change it face stiff resistance including from conservative women advocates who have recently mounted new internet campaigns opposing liberalization efforts. Likewise, Saudi leadership efforts to recognize women's individual legal status face barriers at the implementation level. Some lesser royals remains critical of liberal activists as well. End Summary.

MALE GUARDIANSHIP SYSTEM

[12.](#) (U) The Male Guardianship System (MGS) bars women from conducting everyday affairs without the written consent of a male guardian (father, brother, husband) (Reftel A). Restricted activities include but are not limited to opening bank accounts, pursuing an education, working, receiving medical surgical care, and traveling. The private experience of women activists like Al-Huwaider as well as evidence obtained by groups like Human Rights Watch indicate that women have little-to-no legal standing to conduct their affairs outside of the home, nor do they have a basis for challenging the system. This is also evident on university web sites which explicitly require consent of the male guardian before a woman can enroll in a curriculum. Al-Huwaider claims that millions of women are prisoners in their own homes and that, no matter how old she may be, a Saudi woman who comes of age and is not married cannot find a husband herself. Al-Huwaider argues there are hundreds of thousands of unmarried women deprived of the right to marry because of the guardianship system which requires explicit consent of the male guardian for a wedding to take place.

CHALLENGING THE GUARDIANSHIP SYSTEM

13. (C) PolOffs visited women's rights activist Wajeha Al-Huwaider at Saudi Aramco's main camp in Dhahran on August 5 to learn about her latest activities and campaigns to further the liberalization of women's rights in the KSA. Al-Huwaider, founder of the Society for Protecting and Defending Women's Rights, has received notoriety for challenging the law prohibiting women from driving (Reftel B) by posting a video of herself driving in a rural area of the Eastern Province on YouTube on International Women's Day. More recently, her activities focused on the right to travel abroad without a male guardian and without his permission. She began this campaign by taking a taxi from her residence in Dhahran to the causeway linking the KSA and Bahrain and seeking entry to Bahrain. Al-Huwaider is divorced, which means under Saudi law her ex-husband or her father or a brother would need to give her permission to leave the country. Although she holds a valid passport, every time she tries to leave the KSA she is stopped at the border to Bahrain and turned around for not having obtained permission to leave from her male guardian.

During her last attempt, the border patrol guard told her once she turned 50 (she is currently 40 years old), she might be able to leave the KSA without a permit. Al-Huwaider is continuing this campaign until she is allowed to travel and until the guardianship system is abolished. She declared that Saudi Arabia is "the world's largest women's prison" with "Saudi women having no prospects of ever being released."

PERSONAL REPERCUSSIONS

RIYADH 00001101 002.2 OF 003

14. (C) Al-Huwaider believes that she is banned from participating in training opportunities at Saudi Aramco, her place of employment, because she is regarded as a subversive influence who would affect other women employees. She also believes that her radical (by Saudi standards) stance on women's rights has affected her family. She cited the case of a cousin with the same family name who was denied university entry, despite excellent academic credentials, when the admissions office learned she was a relative of Al-Huwaider. The cousin is now studying outside of the country. All of Al-Huwaider's children are studying in the United States.

ABSOLUTE SUPPORT A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

15. (U) The Saudi leadership's reluctance to fully endorse the liberalization of women's rights is well reflected in an August 9 interview of HH Prince Abdullah Bin Saud Bin Mohammad Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, one of the lesser royals and member of Jeddah's Tourism Development Council, with the Saudi Gazette. The headline of the article states "Saudi Women Could Soon be Ministers." However, in the interview Prince Abdullah Bin Saud only cautiously supports women and advocates "for controlled openness" noting that "absolute support is a double-edged sword." According to the article, Prince Abdullah said he had seen some "uncultured women who don't recognize restrictions to certain appropriate situations and who have offended many Saudi women." He further stated their behavior does not make it easy for decision-makers to take steps to help women and further their importance. The article is based on an interview Prince Abdullah conducted with Arabic language Roaa Women's Magazine (bi-weekly circulation of 10,000).

16. (U) Prince Abdullah stressed that everything is permitted in Islam "except what is restricted by Shariah." Saudi

clerics have issued fatwas opposing the abolition of the guardianship principle. Ultimately, even among Saudis there remains a large amount of uncertainty as to what is a religious mandate and what is a cultural norm, a debate that greatly hampers the advancement of women's rights in the KSA (Reftel C).

IDENTITY CARDS FOR WOMEN A STEP FORWARD, BUT . . .

17. (U) At the same time, the hesitation to fully endorse the liberalization of women's rights reflects the social reality that Saudi leadership is facing opposition to reform from a large conservative social base that is often reluctant to embrace change (Reftel D). In November 2001, the Shura Council voted to begin issuing identity cards for women. Historically, Saudi women were registered on their father's or husband's identity cards and had no independent legal status. The decision to issue identity cards for women found support among the highest ranks of the Saudi leadership, including HRH Prince Nayef Bin Abdul Aziz, Second Deputy Prime Minister of Interior and contender to the throne. However, only the Guardian is able to actually apply for the identity card and many families remain reluctant to have identity cards issued for their female members because the card requires a photo of the card holder's face, a requirement that goes against deeply-rooted Saudi social customs. Most Saudi women wear a niqab or facial veil so as not to reveal their faces in public. Moreover, public offices still refuse to accept the identity card. Recently, a female Saudi employee of US Embassy Riyadh visited a notary public to obtain notarial services and upon producing her identity card, the notary public disregarded it and asked her to produce two male witnesses to identify her. Old customs are hard to break. Yet identity cards have become obligatory at universities and in government offices.

"MY RULER KNOWS ME BEST" CAMPAIGN

18. (U) Activist Rodhah Al-Yousef launched a new campaign under the slogan "My Ruler Knows Me Best" in which she invites like-minded critics to comment and vote on her "National Social Campaign" concerning the liberalization of women's issues. Her website at <http://waluamree.com> criticizes advocacy designed to liberate women and to eliminate male guardians. Al-Yousef describes such calls as

RIYADH 00001101 003.2 OF 003

attempts to westernize society and violate Islamic teachings. Her website states: "We reject the ignorant or malicious claims made by advocates of liberalization and Westernization of our Islamic and Arab identity, such as advocacy for the abolition of the role of guardian." She describes these efforts as "false pretexts of anti-discrimination against women."

19. (U) Arabic-language Shams newspaper reported on the campaign in an August 10 article on page 3, stating the campaign seeks signatures of one million Saudi women, a delegation of which will deliver a letter to HRH King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz. The campaign's media advisor, Muhammed Al-Khayyat, launched the campaign in coordination with various women's groups to deliver a message against anyone trying to "prejudice Islamic principles or inherent Arab values." The repercussions of Al-Yousef's campaign remain to be seen. However, it is evident that there is a wide spectrum of opinions on the desirability and the extent to which women's rights should be granted.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The debate over the role of women in Saudi society is increasingly public, and reveals a wide spectrum of opinions on the desirability and the extent of the rights due female citizens. The great majority of the population, however, remains deeply conservative and rooted in tradition. Given the polarization of the issue and the desire of the leadership to avoid fueling social tensions and instability, major changes and reforms are likely to be slow in coming, and as some religious progressives have told the Charge, will need to be formulated in terms that draw on traditional texts and customs for their justification. Ref E describes how one member of the Council of Senior Ulama argues that the Quran provides women legal rights that Saudi society is not implementing.

ERDMAN